UNITED NATIONS

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Economic and Social Council

Distr.
LIMITED

E/CN.17/1997/L.5/Rev.1
22 April 1997

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Fifth session
8-25 April 1997
Agenda item 4

PREPARATIONS FOR THE SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY FOR THE PURPOSE OF AN OVERALL REVIEW AND APPRAISAL OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AGENDA 21

Summary report of the dialogue session with women

(14 April 1997)

Chairperson: Ms. Monika Linn-Locher (Switzerland), Vice-Chairperson, Commission on Sustainable Development

Facilitator: Ms. Bella Abzug, President, Women's Environment and Development Organization, United States of America

Presenters: Representatives of the following women's organizations made presentations: Country Women Association of Nigeria; Women Food and Agriculture Working Group/Via Campesina (United States); Central and Eastern European Network for Sustainable Consumption and Production (Poland); REDEH Network in Defense of Humankind (Brazil); Movement for Nuclear Safety (Russian Federation); NGO Campaign for the Earth Council (Canada); Perzent Center (Pakistan); Red Thread (Guyana).

PRESENTATIONS

Women are represented in and reflect all nine major groups defined in Agenda 21. Women across class, race, ethnicity and location have come to serve as catalysts for environmental and democratic activism. Yet, despite the two years since the 1995 Beijing Conference and the five years that have passed since the Rio Conference, women comprise the majority of the poor, the landless

and the under-fed. In their dialogue session with Government, women highlight these problems, the obstacles they face in confronting them, and made recommendations for future action.

Activities

Women succeeded in gaining a Principle in Rio Declaration, a chapter and over 170 references to them mainstreamed throughout Agenda 21. Thereafter, women ensured that their holistic gender analysis in used the process and documents of other international conferences, particularly the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995. A number of relevant initiatives have been taken by and for women. For example:

- The Women's Caucus has enabled women to participate in international negotiations and policy-making.

- The 1995 Beijing Conference was instrumental in calling attention to poverty and its effects on the lives of women.

- The 1997 Micro-Summit in Washington, D.C., highlighted the importance of providing credit to poor women. This Summit led to the decision to provide $21.7 billion in micro-credit to poor people by the year 2005.

- The Women's Food Summit called attention to linkages between sustainable development and world food security.

- Local Agenda 21 efforts are successfully under way around the world. They have helped strengthen mechanisms to integrate women in decision-making processes and are helping to alter unsustainable production and consumption patterns.

Obstacles

Women are key to achieving sustainable development. Thus, the inequities and prejudices that confront women also hinder general progress towards sustainability. Specific obstacles concern lack of representation and credit, as well as poverty, trade and debt-related issues.

- Although women constitute over 50 per cent of the world's population, one constitute far less than the same ratio in Governments throughout the world.

- Participation by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the United Nations is limited and stifles the important voice of women.

- Lack of credit for women prevents them from achieving financial independence.

- Barriers to land ownership by women not only stifle their prospects for financial independence but also create disincentives for following sustainable practices.

Trade imbalances and debt crises contribute to poverty-related problems which are particularly troubling for women.

- The growing emphasis on food as a commodity and on agro-business has negative effects regarding sustainable agriculture and world food security. This has important implications for women farmers, as well as for the well-being of women and children.

- Testing of toxic materials, radioactive pollution and the use of pesticides are violating the health and reproductive rights of women.

- The rights of indigenous women are not recognized.

- Current modes of advertising denigrate women and contribute to unsustainable patterns of production and consumption.

Priorities

Women's representatives raised the following priorities for consideration by the Commission on Sustainable Development and other actors involved in the sustainable development process:

- Mechanisms that promote representation of women in Government.

- Access to credit to empower women and combat poverty.

- Equal access to education.

- Subsidy removal and taxes that counteract the negative effects of commercial advertising, such as gender stereotyping.

- Learning from the Local Agenda 21 initiatives.

- Action-oriented efforts to deal with industrial 'hot spots' and other environmental hazards such as radioactive waste.

DIALOGUE

Representatives of the following Governments made statements: Australia, Canada, China, Cuba, Egypt, Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Peru, Philippines, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Representatives of the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) and the Campaign for the Earth International, a non-governmental organization, also made statements.

Some government representatives described their efforts in micro-financing (Australia, Bangladesh, Netherlands, Switzerland) and in mainstreaming women's concerns (Philippines, China). Others identified poverty as the main obstacle to achieving the goals outlined at the Beijing Conference and urged countries to promote capacity-building for women and provide special attention to women in

indigenous communities (Peru). The representative of INSTRAW noted poverty issues concerning women.

Government representatives also discussed the role of women in agricultural production (Sweden) and trade, including export-driven, monoculture economies (Cuba, Netherlands), food security and hostile food policies (Cuba). One government representative noted linkages between the transboundary movement of hazardous material and women's health (Australia).

Several government representatives noted the importance of addressing the role of men and how men perceive themselves in society (Sweden). Some government representatives noted that gender issues required policies for men as well as women (Sweden, Norway). For example, some countries require parental leave for men (Norway).

One government representative noted that regional or global hot-spot designations are not feasible for certain environmental problems and that national designations would be necessary in most cases (Egypt). Some government representatives noted that the conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women should be incorporated into the decisions of the Commission on Sustainable Development (Finland).

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

- Ensure full and equal participation of women in decision-making at every level of all social, political and economic areas.

- Commit the necessary resources and establish time-bound targets for integrating women fully into the development of policies, institutions, mechanisms, implementation and evaluation of all future plans for sustainable development.

- Ensure that women's reproductive and productive contributions are measured, valuated and integrated into national accounts and in the calculation of national wealth.

- Identify industrial hot spots and prepare a plan to clean these areas.

- Regulate commercial advertising and identify instruments to combat its negative effects.

- Ensure that ongoing negotiations on the multilateral agreement on investment will equally address the rights and responsibilities of corporations in sustainable development processes.

- Establish a mechanism within the Commission to monitor and guide the actions of the World Trade Organization.

- Earmark 1 per cent of all funding dispersed via the World Bank, regional development banks and other international financial institutions to support rural women, who make up the main share of the world's 1.3 billion poor.

- Support appropriate and gender-fair education, health, recreation, child-care and other infrastructural systems designed by and for rural communities.

- Promote "sustainable agriculture" rather than "agricultural sustainability".

- Affirm and pledge to reach the Micro-credit Summit (Washington, D.C., February 1997) goal of raising $21.7 billion to ensure that 100 million of the world's poorest women and their families receive credit for self-employment by the year 2005.

- Remove legislative, policy, administrative and customary barriers to women's equal rights to natural resources, including access to and control over land (and other forms of property), credit, inheritance, information, and new technology.

- Strengthen the reporting requirements by Governments to the Commission and improve links with other relevant bodies of the Economic and Social Council such as the Commission on the Status of Women.

- Review and address the impact on women's public and private sector genetic research, bio-prospecting, bio-trade and bio-technology policies and programmes.

- Strengthen the role of women in efforts to implement Agenda 21. In doing this, the Commission should examine examples where efforts to increase participation have been successful and disseminate this information widely.